

"What you want it good an' sharp for?"  
 "An ax serves best," Tom evaded, "when 'tis sharp."

"Look you, Tom!" said Bob. "You're behavin' in a very queer way, an' I gives you warnin' o' the fac'. What happens? Here I comes quite unexpected on you by candlelight in the shed. Who is I? I'm his Majesty's mail. Mark that, Tom! An' what does I find you doin'? Puttin' an edge on an ax. I asks you why you're puttin' an edge on your ax, an' you won't tell. If I didn't know you for a mild man, Tom, I'd fancy you was tired o' your wife."

"Tired o' my wife!" Tom exploded indignantly. "I isn't goin' t' kill my wife!"

"Who is you goin' t' kill?"

"I isn't goin' t' kill nobody."

"Well, what you goin' t' kill?"

"I isn't goin' t' kill nothin'."

"Well, then," Bob burst out, "what in thunder is you puttin' an edge on your ax for at this time o' night?"

"Who? Me?"

"Ay—you!"

"I got some doctorin' t' do."

Bob lifted his brows. "Hum!" he coughed. "You usually do your doctorin' with an ax?" he inquired.

"No," said Tom uneasily; "not with an ax."

"What you usually use, Tom?"

"What I usually uses, Bob," Tom replied, "is a decoction an' a spoon."

"Somebody recommend an ax for this complaint?"

"Tisn't that, Bob. 'Tis this way. When I haves a job t' do, Bob, I always uses what serves best an' lies handy. That's jus' plain common sense an' cleverness. Well, then, jus' now an ax suits me to a t. An' so I'm puttin' a good edge on the only ax I got."

"An ax," Bob observed, "will do quick work."

"That's jus' what I thought!" cried Tom, delighted. "Quick an' painless."

"There's jus' one trouble about an ax," Bob went on dryly, "when used in the practice o' medicine. What's done with an ax," he concluded, "is hard t' repair."

THE doctor, having finished his professional round of the Candlestick cottages in good time, harnessed his dogs, soon after noon next day. Evidently the folk of Amen Island were well. They had been frivolous, no doubt—but had not been caught at it. Amen Island was to be omitted. Doctor Rolfe was ready for the trail to Poor Luck Harbor on the way south. He shouted a last good-by to the folk of Candlestick Cove, who had gathered to wish him God-speed, and laughed in delighted satisfaction with their affection, and waved his hand, and called to his dogs and cracked his whip; and he would have been gone south from Candlestick Cove on the way to Poor Luck Harbor and Afternoon Arm in another instant had he not caught sight of Bob Likely coming up the harbor ice.

As old Bob was doubtless from Amen Island, and as he carried the gossip of the coast on the tip of his tongue, Doctor Rolfe halted his team and waited for him.

"From Amen, Bob?"

"I is, sir. I'm jus' come across the floe."

"Are they all well?"

"Well, no, sir; they isn't. The Little Fiddler is in mortal trouble. I fears, sir, he's bound aloft."

"Hut!" the Doctor scoffed. "What's the matter with the Little Fiddler?"

"He've a sore finger, sir."

The Doctor pondered this. He frowned, perplexed. "What sort of a sore finger?"

"They thinks 'tis mortification, sir."

"Gangrene! What do you think, Bob?"

"It looks like it, sir. I seed a case, sir, when I were off sealin' on the—"

"Was the finger bruised?"

"No, sir; 'twasn't bruised."

"Was it frost-bitten?"

"No, sir; 'twasn't the frost that done it. I made sure o' that. It come from a small cut, sir."

"A simple infection, probably. Did you see a line of demarcation?"

"Sir?"

"It was discolored?"

"Oh, ay, sir! 'Twas some queer sort o' color."

"What color?"

"Well, sir," said Bob cautiously, "I wouldn't say as t' that. I'd say jus' 'twas some mortal queer sort o' color."

"Was there a definite line between the discoloration and the sound flesh?"

Bob Likely scratched his head.

"I don't quite mind," said he, "whether there was or not."

"Then there was not," the Doctor declared, relieved. "You would not have failed to note that line. 'Tis not gangrene. The lad's all right. That's good. Everybody else well on Amen Island?"

Bob was troubled.

"They're t' cut that finger off," said he, "jus' as soon as little Terry will yield. Las' night, sir, we wasn't able t' overcome his objection. 'Tis what he calls one of his fiddle fingers, sir, an' he's holdin' out—"

"Cut it off? Absurd! They'll not do that."

"Ay; but they will, sir. 'Tis t' be done the night, sir, with the help o' Sandy Lands an' Black Walt Anderson. They're t' catch un an' hold un, sir. They'll wait no longer. They're afear'd o' losin' little Terry altogether."

"But surely—"

"If 'twere mortification, sir, wouldn't you cut that finger off?"

"At once."

"With an ax?"

"If I had nothing better."

"An' if the lad was obstinate—"

"If an immediate operation seemed to be advisable, I would have the lad held."

"Well, sir," said Bob, "they thinks 'tis mortification, sir; an', not knowin' no better—"

"Thank you," said the Doctor. He turned to Mild Jim Cull. "Skipper James," said he, "have Timmie take care of the dogs. I'll cross Ships' Run and lance that finger."

DUSK fell on Amen Island. No doctor had crossed the Run. No saving help—no help of any sort, except the help of Sandy Lands and Black Walt Anderson to hold the rebellious subject—had come. Doctor Rolfe had been delayed at Candlestick Cove.

The great news of his fortunate passing had spread inland overnight to the tilts of Battle River. Before the Doctor could get under way for Amen Island, an old dame of Serpent Bend, who had come helter-skelter through the timber, whipping her team, frantic to be in time to command relief before the Doctor's departure, drove up alone, with four frowsy dogs, and desired the extraction of a tooth; and this delayed the Doctor an hour or more. Then a woman of Silver Fox was driven in—a matter that occupied Doctor Rolfe until the day was near spent and the crossing of Ships' Run was a hazard.

"You'll put it off, sir?" Skipper James advised.

The Doctor surveyed the ice and the sky beyond Amen Island.

"I wish I might," said he frankly.

"I would, sir."

"I—I can't, very well."

"The floe's started down the Run, sir."

"Yes-s," the Doctor admitted uneasily; "but you see, Skipper James, I—I—"

IT was falling dusk and blowing up when Doctor Rolfe and Skipper James, gaffs in hand,—a gaff is a lithe, iron-shod pole, eight or ten feet long,—left the heads of Candlestick Cove for the ice of Ships' Run; and a spit of frosty snow—driving in straight lines—was in the gale. Amen Island, lying nearly in the wind's eye, was hardly distinguishable, through the misty interval, from the blue-black sky beyond. Somewhere to leeward of Candlestick Cove the jam had yielded to the rising pressure of the wind. The floe was outward bound from the Run. It was already moving in the channel, and the ice was thinning out with accelerating speed as the compression was relieved. All the while, thus, as Doctor Rolfe and Skipper James made across, the path was diminishing and vanishing.

In the slant of the wind the ice in the channel of Ships' Run was blown lightly against the Candlestick coast. About the

urgent business of its escape to the wide water of Great Yellow Bay, the floe rubbed the Candlestick rocks in passing and crashed around the corner of Dead Man's Point. Near Amen Island, where the wind fell with less force, there was a perilous line of separation. In the lee of the Amen hills, a lane of water was opening between the inert shore ice and the wind-blown main floe.

When Doctor Rolfe and Skipper James came to this widening breach, they were delayed; and when they had drawn near the coast of Amen they were halted altogether.

"We're stopped, sir," Skipper James declared. "We'd best turn back, sir, while there's time."

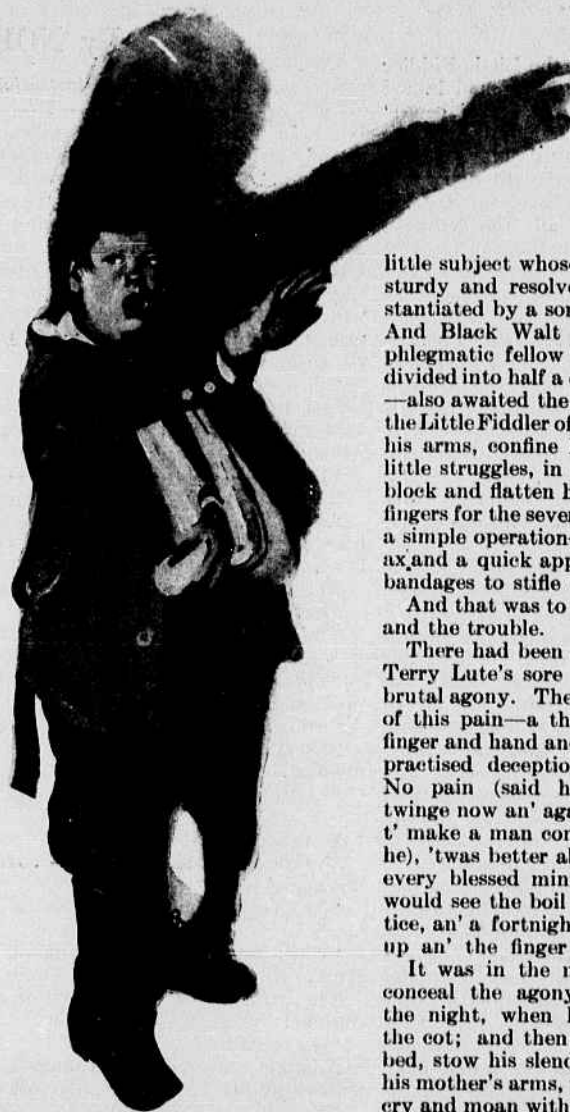
"One moment—"

"No chance, sir."

"I'm an agile man, Skipper James. One moment. I—"

"A man can't cross that slush, sir."

Past Deep Water Head the last of the floe was driving. There is a wide little cove there—it is called Deep Water Cove; and there is deep water—a drop of ten fathoms, they say—under Deep Water Cliff. There was open water in both directions beyond the points of the cove. Heavy arctic ice—fragments of glacial bergs—had caught the lesser, more brittle



"Terry Lute would not have his finger off. 'I'll not have it off! I can't spare it.'"

drift-pans of the floe against the broken base and submerged face of Deep Water Cliff, and ground them slowly to slush in the swells. There were six feet of this slush, perhaps—a depth of six feet and a width of thirty. Should a man's leg go deep enough he would not be able to withdraw it; and once fairly caught—both feet gripped—he would inevitably drop through. It would be slow and horrible, like sinking in a quicksand.

IT was near dark. The falling snow fast narrowed the circle of vision.

"I might get across," said Doctor Rolfe. "You'll not try, sir," Skipper James declared positively.

There was something in Skipper James's tone to make Doctor Rolfe lift his brows.

"What's that?" said he, smiling grimly.

"I says you'll not try."

Doctor Rolfe laughed uneasily.

"No?"

"No, sir."

Skipper James was a big man. Doctor Rolfe measured his length and breadth and power with new interest. Decidedly, Skipper James was a big fellow! And his intentions were plain.

"But, Skipper James, you see, my dear fellow—"

"No, sir." Skipper James moved within reach.

"I'm quite sure—"

"No."

Doctor Rolfe stared at the breach of slush. He faced away. Then, abruptly, "Well, I," he admitted, with a shrug, "no doubt you're right, Skipper James. I—"

IN Tom Lute's cottage beyond Come-

Along Point of Amen Island they were ready for the operation. There was a thick round billet of birch up-ended in the middle of the kitchen floor, to serve as a block for the amputation; and the ax was sharp at last,—at hand, too, but concealed, for the moment, behind the pantry door,—and a pot of tar was warming on the kitchen

stove. Sandy Lands had reported for duty, whom nothing but a sense of duty had drawn to a hand in the surgical assistance—a bit perturbed as he contemplated the task of restraining the struggles of a violent

little subject whose temper he knew, but sturdy and resolved, his resolution substantiated by a sort of religious austerity. And Black Walt Anderson—a gigantic, phlegmatic fellow who would have subdivided into half a dozen little Terry Lutes—also awaited the signal to pounce upon the Little Fiddler of Amen Island, imprison his arms, confine his legs, subdue all his little struggles, in short, bear him to the block and flatten his hand and spread his fingers for the severing blow. It was to be a simple operation—a swift descent of the ax and a quick application of hot tar and bandages to stifle the wound.

And that was to be the end of the finger and the trouble.

There had been a good deal of trouble. Terry Lute's sore finger was a source of brutal agony. There had been many days of this pain—a throbbing torture in the finger and hand and arm. And Terry had practised deception to a heroic degree. No pain (said he); but—ah, well, a twinge now an' again—but nothin' at all t' make a man complain. An' sure (said he), 'twas better all the while—improvin' every blessed minute, sir. A day more would see the boil yield t' mother's poultice, an' a fortnight would see un healed up an' the finger able for labor again.

It was in the night that Terry could conceal the agony no longer—deep in the night, when his mother sat beside the cot; and then he would crawl out of bed, stow his slender little body away in his mother's arms, put his head down, and cry and moan without shame until he had exhausted himself and fallen into a fitful sleep. No, it was no trifling agony for Terry Lute to withstand. And he knew all the while, moreover, that the cut of an ax—no more, it might be, than a flash—would eventually relieve him. Terry Lute was not afraid of the pain of the thing they wanted to do; that was not the inspiration of his infuriated rebellion.

This affair of Terry Lute's finger was of gravest moment; had the finger gangrened, it must come off in haste—and the sooner the better; and an ax and a pot of tar were the serviceable instruments, according to the teaching of all experience. Doubtless doctors were better provided and more able; but, as there was no doctor to be had, and as Terry Lute was loved and greatly desired in the flesh, and as he was apparently in peril of a sudden